

THE "GOOD MORNING" THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

Pedro, the security guard at a major food plant, welcomed the sound of jangling keys, as it signaled lockup time at the plant, the end of a long and tiring workday.

"Everybody out?" the manager asked. "Nope, the rabbi is still inside somewhere."

By "the rabbi," Pedro meant David, a religious Jew - albeit far from a rabbi - who wore a kippah and beard, hence his nickname.

The manager went off to search for David, but shortly later he returned alone.

"No sign of David. Are you absolutely sure he didn't leave yet? Maybe you didn't notice him slip by as he left for the day?"

"Sir, I am positive he's in there somewhere," Pedro replied with conviction. Looking none too pleased, the manager went off looking for David for the second time. After a few minutes he was back, but no David. With as much calm as he could muster, he said, "Pedro, you must be mistaken. I have searched the facility twice. There's no way I'm going back to search again."

Meanwhile, not a hundred feet away, in a walk-in freezer locked from the outside, David lay semiconscious, literally freezing to death. His muted calls for help began to slur until they faded completely. "So, this is what it feels like to die...", he mused. Barely coherent, he managed to mutter the Shema. He was ready to meet his Creator.

As if in a distant dream, he heard what seemed to be the sound of a screaming angel. "I'm locking up now," the manager yelled, his tone leaving no room for arguments. And yet Pedro persisted, "Sir, allow me to check myself, maybe the rabbi is in some type of trouble..." At the mention of the word "trouble," the manager jumped and dashed towards the freezers...

The next day, the manager asked Pedro: "I'm really curious. How did you know that David was still inside the plant?"

"It's really very simple," Pedro answered. "Every single morning without fail, I am greeted with a solitary 'good morning.' It's the rabbi who greets me this way. Every evening, upon leaving, he wishes me a hearty 'good night.' Yesterday morning I received my usual cheery 'good morning,' but I still hadn't received my usual 'good night'..."

In *The Elements of Style*, a classic by William Strunk, heralded as a writer's guide that "should be the daily companion of anyone who writes," the author makes the case for concise writing:

"Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a

paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires...that every word tell."

There is no better model of this complex art mastered than the Torah.

The need for precision is especially essential to the Torah, whose mission statement - as its name, from the Hebrew word Hora'ah, "instruction," suggests - is to instruct. As befits an instruction manual whose chief objective is clarity, its structure, style, and wording are crisp and succinct.

Wherever in Torah this principle doesn't seem to operate, a deeper reading is required.

One such example is the fortieth chapter of Genesis, which tells the elaborate tale of two dreams dreamt by Pharaoh's imprisoned ex-butler and - baker, as well as their respective interpretations and outcomes.

While it's true that this chapter adds flow to the story - without it we could only speculate as to how Joseph, a lowly inmate, managed to grab the attention and ear of a mighty king in need of a dream decoder—the particulars of this episode are seemingly superfluous.

A concise telling might have been: "And it came to pass that the king's jailed ministers each dreamt a dream which Joseph accurately deciphered. His interpretation was fulfilled when Pharaoh's ex-butler was freed and restored to power. He was later recommended to Pharaoh as an interpreter of dreams."

This version would both satisfy our curiosity and keep the story running, while adhering to the "short and snappy" principle. No?

A Redeeming Approach

Arguably, Joseph is the biblical character to suffer most throughout his formative years and beyond.

Frequently the subject of jealousy and hate, Joseph's early memories could not have been pretty. Abuse and misery were the story of his life, which featured betrayal, too, as a recurring theme.

Here is how his biography would have read, up to the point of his incarceration:

Joseph son of Jacob: At a young age he lost his mother. To make up for his loss, his father favored him from among his sons. The plan backfired; he was hated by his brothers. At 17 he was uprooted from home and sold into slavery by his own brothers. Picked up by Potiphar, an Egyptian officer, he quickly ascended the ladder of success, ultimately assuming responsibility over his master's estate. At some point he caught the attention of his boss's wife, who tried to seduce him. After he repeatedly refused her attempts, she accused him of attempted rape, and he became the butt of a national scandal. By a miracle, his life was spared and he was thrown into prison, left to languish there for the rest of his life.

At this point, he had every right to be a bitter man. He could have withdrawn into himself, as many prisoners do, allowing thoughts of anger and victimization to consume him. Those thoughts would have been justified, for he was truly the victim of false charges. In all but a moment, the ladder he had climbed so fast and high had toppled over.

At this point, he had every right to be a bitter man. With time on his hands, he could have recalled his youth and his loving father, and wallowed in self-pity. He could have relentlessly nursed his old wounds, whiling away his time by fantasizing about taking sweet revenge upon his enemies.

A boy of noble background, he might have resented and looked down upon his prison-mates, lewd Egyptian idol-worshippers.

And he certainly should have despised the prison wardens who represented, and were employed by, a judicial system that ignored justice. The one that had found him guilty of attempted rape, when in fact he was the victim of precisely that.

As such, we might be startled to read that "the prison warden placed all inmates that were in the prison in Joseph's custody, and everything that was done there, he would do."

This appointment was born of the affection he was shown by warden and prisoner alike. Because he hated neither of them and treated them with concern and goodwill. His cheery spirits were infectious as he went about his work, and his unique communication skills bettered the relationship between the inmates and their supervisors.

Instead of folding his arms in protest, he rolled up his sleeves to contribute. He would make the best of his situation, and that of anyone he encountered. His gloomy past behind him, he worked hard toward a bright future.

This was not the shrewd behavior of a desperate man trying to earn his freedom, or of a social climber bent on pleasing his superiors. This was the genuine and generous behavior of a man who never lost touch with his humanity. His acts of goodness and kindness, which lit up that hellhole and the lives of its inhabitants, were a testament to his inextinguishable love for G-d and mankind.

A Fateful Day

"And it happened that the king's cupbearer and baker transgressed against their master, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was enraged at his two courtiers, and he placed them into the prison where Joseph was confined. The chamberlain of the butchers appointed Joseph to them, and he attended them."

PARSHAT VAYEISHEV

14 - 20 Kislev 5785
15 - 21 December 2024

Torah: Genesis 37:1 - 40:23
Haftorah: Amos 2:6 - 3:8

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalm 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

Psalms Daily

A fundamental principle of Chabad philosophy is that the mind, which by its innate nature rules over the heart, must subordinate the heart to G-d's service by utilizing the intellectualization, comprehension, and profound contemplation of the greatness of the Creator of the universe.

Hayom Yom

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No One Alone,
No One Forgotten.

These men were probably friendly with Potiphar before their demotion, possibly belonging to the very same golf club. Not only did they represent the type of people who had ruined Joseph's life, Potiphar might even have consulted them before pressing false charges against Joseph. And, along with all of Egypt's gossipy elite, they certainly knew that Joseph was guiltless, yet they stood by silently as he was convicted.

Joseph had every reason to hate them, every excuse to enjoy their disgrace and downfall as they had probably enjoyed his.

Anyone else in his sandals, and possessing his advantageous position, would surely have terrorized these selfish men, taking great pleasure in watching them suffer.

Others, perhaps, but not Joseph.

"Joseph came to them in the morning. He saw them and behold they were aggrieved. He asked, 'Why are your faces downcast today?'"

At first glance, the question seems preposterous. Due to their minor mistakes in the palace, they had incurred Pharaoh's wrath, costing them their exalted position, much humiliation, and imprisonment. In a moment they'd been brought from riches to rags. If that wasn't enough of a reason to fret, they were facing possible capital punishment.

A second glance, however, brings us closer to the true depth of his question and gives us insight into his compassionate heart.

Listen carefully to Joseph's words.

He didn't ask, "Why are your faces downcast?"

The answer to that question he already knew from his own heartbreaking life experiences.

Rather, he asked, "Why are your faces downcast today?" implying that he discerned in them today a

deeper sadness than the one he had detected in them the day before.

So in tune was he with others that he recognized in them even the slightest change of condition from one day to the next.

And he'd hit the spot. The previous night, "the two of them dreamt a dream." They remembered their dreams, but the interpretation eluded them. They had no way of decoding what they believed to have been a glimpse into their future and fate. We can only imagine their profound frustration.

But Joseph didn't have to imagine it, for it clutched at his tender heart. Hypersensitive to others—when he might have been so towards himself—he never ceased to reach out to those hurting and in need.

Ultimately, it was this genuine act of brotherhood that brought salvation to an entire world.

For it was his taking note of their distress that stirred him to respond. And it was his response that resulted in his decoding their dreams.

It was this decoding that later brought him to be mentioned to Pharaoh when he sought an interpreter of dreams. And it was his being mentioned that led him to assist the king with the interpretation.

It was his interpretation that notified Pharaoh of an impending world famine; it was this knowledge that motivated him to fill Egypt's storehouses.

And it was the filling of Egypt's storehouses that brought sustenance to a world on the verge of starvation.

What might have happened had Joseph not noticed another person's pain?

What's in It for Me?

Joseph represents the abused child, spouse, student or employee. He speaks for the slave, the captive, the wrongly convicted prisoner. He personifies all races discriminated against, and all oppressed religions. He

is the voice of those who suffer, those born into hunger, sickness, poverty, illiteracy, child exploitation and lawlessness. For those who were never given a chance.

But as much as he speaks for them, he speaks to them. Gently and in a nonjudgmental way, he says:

The urge to sulk, to retreat into ourselves, to blame, to become desensitized to others, can be overpowering. The allure of cynicism, pessimism, suspicion, and scorn can be equally compelling.

We tell ourselves that our suffering at the hands of uncaring people, or life's painful twists, earned us the right to be bitter and removed. Why should we respond with a warm smile, word or deed?

Why should we notice others when we are never noticed?

Says Joseph from experience: For no other reason than that is how an entire world is changed.

...More for Me

People tend to ask themselves: Do I really matter?

True, in my little sphere of influence I am a contributor, but in the bigger scheme of things—on a national or even global level—does little me truly make a difference? Do the good deeds that I do amount to much; do they really make a difference?

Your act of kindness not only makes a difference, it could make the difference. Teaches Maimonides: The fate of the world is on a balanced scale, weighted equally by good and evil. It takes one small "insignificant" act of good, performed by one small "insignificant" person, to tip the scale towards good, bringing redemption to the world.

Your act of kindness not only makes a difference, it could make the difference.

A little bit of light dispels lots of darkness.1

So, let's join hearts, minds and hands in making a world of difference!

By Rabbi Mendel Kalmenson

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 14 Kislev 5785 - 15 December 2024
Reuben Born (1568 BCE)

Reuben, the eldest son of Jacob and Leah, was born in Charan (Mesopotamia) on 14 Kislev of the year 2193 (1568 BCE). As Jacob's firstborn, he was initially entitled to the leadership of Israel and to a double portion in the Holy Land, but these privileges were taken from him (and given respectively to Judah and Joseph) because he sinned by "violating the bed of his father." Reuben unsuccessfully tried to prevent the persecution of Joseph by his brothers in 2216 (1545 BCE) and subsequently berated them for selling him into slavery. In 2238 he relocated to Egypt together with his father, brothers, and their children, where he died on his 125th birthday in 2318 (1443 BCE).

Monday, 15 Kislev 5785 - 16 December 2024
Rabbi Judah the Prince (188 CE)

Rabbi Judah the Prince - also known as Rabbeinu Hakadosh ("our holy master"), or simply as "Rabbi", was elected Nasi (spiritual and civil head of the Jewish community at large) after the death of his father, Rabbi Simeon ben Gamliel. Foreseeing that due to the tribulations of the Exile which the Jewish nation was about to endure it was likely that many of the sacred laws would be forgotten, Rabbi Judah decided to gather, record, edit, and organize the statements of the earlier sages, setting the Oral Law down in writing for very the first time, in the form of the Mishnah.

He passed away on 15 Kislev around 3948 (188 CE); some say it was around 3979 (219 CE).

Tuesday, 16 Kislev 5785 - 17 December 2024
Noah's Ark Comes to Rest (2104 BCE)

On this day, the bottom of Noah's ark, submerged 11 cubits beneath the water's surface, touched down and came to rest on the top of Mount Ararat.

Wednesday 17 Kislev 5785 - 18 December 2024
Ezra Cries and Prays (348 BCE)

On this day in 3412 (348 BCE), Ezra the Scribe went up to the Holy Temple and fasted, prayed, and cried in public. While he prayed and confessed, weeping and prostrating himself in front of the Temple, a large assemblage of men, women, and children gathered around him.

At that time, all of the assembled priests and Israelites swore to send away their non-Jewish wives. Ezra then issued a proclamation that all Jews residing in Israel should assemble in three days' time in Jerusalem (see Today in Jewish History for the 20th of Kislev).

Thursday, 18 Kislev 5785 - 19 December 2024
R. Abraham Maimuni (1237)

Rabbi Abraham Maimuni HaNagid (also called "Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam") was the only son of Maimonides (the famed Talmudist, codifier of Jewish Law, philosopher, physician and statesman, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, 4895-4964, or 1135-1204). Born in 1185, Rabbi Abraham succeeded his father as the leader of the Jewish community in Fostat (old Cairo), Egypt, at the tender age of 19. He wrote many responsa and commentaries explaining and defending his father's writings and Halachic rulings. Rabbi Abraham passed away on the 18th of Kislev 4998 (1237).

Rabbi Baruch Mezhibuzher (1811)

Rabbi Baruch was the son of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov's daughter, Adel, and her husband, Rabbi Yecheiel Ashkenazi. He was born in 5513 (1753) in Mezhibuz, the town from which his illustrious grandfather led the Chassidic Movement. He was one of the pre-eminent Rebbes (Chassidic masters) in the 3rd generation of Chassidism and had thousands of disciples and followers.

Friday, 19 Kislev 5785 - 20 December 2024
Passing of Maggid (1772)

Rabbi DovBer, known as "The Maggid of Mezeritch", was the disciple of, and successor to, the founder of Chassidism, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. Rabbi DovBer led the Chassidic movement from 5521 (1761) until his passing on 19 Kislev, 5532 (1772).

Liberation of R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1798)

On 19 Kislev 5559 (1798), Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi - a leading disciple of Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch (see previous entry) and the founder of Chabad Chassidism - was released from his imprisonment in the Peter-Paul fortress in Petersburg, where he was held for 53 days on charges that his teachings threatened the imperial authority of the Czar. More than a personal liberation, this was a watershed event in the history of Chassidism heralding a new era in the revelation of the "inner soul" of Torah, and is celebrated to this day as "The Rosh Hashanah (New Year) of Chassidism."

Shabbat, 20 Kislev 5785 - 21 December 2024
Ezra's Address (347 BCE)

Ezra, head of the Sanhedrin and the leader of the Jewish people at the time of the building of the Second Temple, made an historic address to a three-day assemblage of Jews in Jerusalem, exhorting them to adhere to the teachings of the Torah and to dissolve their interfaith marriages (the Jewish people were on the verge of complete assimilation at the time, following their 70-year exile in Babylonia).

Tanya Published (1796)

The first printing of the "Bible of Chassidism", the Tanya, the magnum opus of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad.